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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 VILNIUS 001093

SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: CODEL KOLBE AND BELARUSIAN OPPOSITION DISCUSS
STEPS FOR CHANGE

REF: MINSK 1205

Classified By: Embassy Minsk Pol-Econ Chief Derrick Hogan for reasons 1
.4 (b) and (d).

1. (C) Summary: The congressional delegation led by Congressman Jim Kolbe expressed unwavering commitment to a diverse group of Belarusian opposition leaders and pledged its continued support for democratic change in Belarus. Two U.S. NGOs, the International Republican Institute and the National Democratic Institute, organized the October 10 meeting. The Belarusian delegation, which comprised leaders of the 10 democratic coalition, independent media, and human rights NGOs, strongly encouraged the congressional delegation to increase U.S. financial assistance to Belarusian democratic forces, particularly in the area of print media. The Belarusian opposition leaders were cautiously optimistic about the prospects for democratic change in the near future, with the 2006 presidential elections serving as the catalyzing event. End Summary.

2. (SBU) The local representatives of NDI and IRI organized a meeting on October 10 for CODEL Kolbe to express continued U.S. support for the Belarusian opposition movement and to discuss prospects for democratic reform in the country.

U.S. Participants

-- Congressman Kolbe (R-AZ)
-- Congressman Sabo (D-MN)
-- Congressman Carter (R-TX)
-- Congressman Moran (D-VA)
-- Congressman Rehberg (R-MT)
-- Congressman Shimkus (R-IL)
-- Trygve Olson, local representative of U.S. NGO IRI
-- David Hamilton, local representative of U.S. NGO NDI
-- Ambassador Mull

Belarusian Participants

-- Anatoly Lebedko, head of the opposition United Civic Party (UCP)
-- Sergey Kalyakin, head of pro-democracy Belarusian Party of Communists
-- Svetlana Zavadsкая, wife of disappeared journalist and co-founder of NGO We Remember
-- Victor Karnienko, head of human rights NGO Civil Initiatives
-- Petr Martsev, general manager of independent newspaper BDG
-- Yuras Hubarevich, youth leader in Belarusian Popular Front (BPF)
-- Valentina Sviatskaya, leader in BPF

U.S. Ready and Willing to Help

3. (C) Congressman Kolbe congratulated the members of the Belarusian opposition for their courage, bravery, and commitment to democratic change in Belarus. He also congratulated those members representing the 10 democratic coalition for a successful democratic convention October 1-2 in Minsk (reftel). Kolbe noted the democratic convention represented an important step forward in the consolidation of democratic forces ahead of the 2006 presidential elections. He also thanked IRI and NDI for facilitating the unification of opposition forces and stressed the United States was committed to providing the necessary support to the opposition. Congressman Shimkus added the Belarusian leaders should take full advantage of the meeting to articulate the areas where the USG can provide more financial support for the opposition, pointing out that several congressmen present in the meeting sit on the U.S. House Appropriations Committee.

Best Approach to Lukashenko: Engagement or Isolation?

4. (C) Congressman Shimkus asked Belarusian civil society leaders about how to support democratic change in Belarus. Lebedko, runner-up candidate in the October 1-2 democratic congress, emphatically stated that engagement with Lukashenko is the wrong approach. He argued that the Belarusian

president will use any attempt by the West to mend ties with his government to his own advantage. Independent newspaper general manager Martsev supported Lebedko's views. Martsev noted that continued discussions over whether engagement is the correct strategy imply there is still some doubt about the existence of a dictatorship in Belarus. According to Martsev, such discussions should cease because the issue is clear, "there is a real dictatorship in Belarus."

15. (C) Lebedko stressed throughout the meeting that the international community should adopt a tougher position vis-a-vis Lukashenko and even encouraged the United States to pressure the EU to apply economic sanctions against the Lukashenko regime. The UCP leader noted that limiting or cutting off trade between the EU and Belarus would seriously affect the stability of Lukashenko's regime, although Lebedko acknowledged several EU member states would also be adversely affected by such a strategy.

Lack of Access to Independent Information Key Impediment

16. (C) All members of the Belarusian delegation noted that the regime's tight control over media access represented the most serious obstacle to democratic change in Belarus. Martsev reminded the congressional delegation that the Lukashenko regime has established absolute control over television and radio media, and has taken drastic steps to eliminate independent print media. According to Martsev, only six national and 20 regional independent newspapers currently exist in Belarus, and excessive GOB fines and restrictions are forcing these remaining newspapers to shut down or reduce operations. Consequently, most Belarusians possess little information about the opposition, and the information they do possess has largely come from state media sources.

But Print Media, Not External Broadcasting, Is the Answer

17. (C) When asked about the possibility of broadcasting independent information about Belarus into the country from neighboring countries, the Belarusian civil society activists expressed serious doubt that such initiatives would be fruitful in the short term. Kalyakin, pro-democracy Communist leader and likely campaign manager for 10 coalition presidential candidate Alexander Milinkevich, maintained that television and radio projects should be pursued only after the 2006 elections. He argued that external broadcasting requires huge sums of financial and technical resources and, equally important, there was insufficient time for external broadcasting to have a real impact on the elections.

18. (C) Kalyakin and others encouraged the congressmen to channel more resources to supporting independent print media. The communist leader emphasized increasing U.S. direct assistance to independent newspapers and providing the opposition with the resources to purchase printing machines and printing paper. The printing equipment would allow the 10 coalition to print flyers and bulletins that would be used in the door-to-door voter outreach campaign.

Rigged Elections to Serve As Catalyst for Change

19. (C) Kolbe asked for an assessment of the possibility for transparent elections in Belarus and the prospects for a victory by an opposition candidate in the elections. Kalaykin and Lebedko noted it was highly unlikely the upcoming presidential elections would meet international standards. That said, the Belarusians stressed their focus is on reaching out to the voters in a door-to-door campaign, familiarizing the electorate with the opposition platform and convincing voters to vote for democratic change. Lebedko was optimistic the opposition could persuade voters to join their camp. He noted that recent opinion polls in Belarus indicate 65 percent of the population is in favor of democratic change and 17 percent said they are "ready to defend their vote" in the event domestic and international observers detected mass fraud in the elections.

110. (C) Karnienko, NGO leader and close advisor to 10 coalition candidate Milinkevich, agreed with the opinion poll data, but stressed it remained unclear whether those in favor of democratic change are willing to vote for the opposition candidate. Karnienko believes the popular rejection of rigged presidential elections in 2006 will largely be a function of the extent to which the opposition is successful in galvanizing popular resentment against Lukashenko prior to the elections.

Comment

11. (C) The Belarusian opposition leaders provided the U.S. congressmen a cautiously optimistic assessment of the

prospects for democratic change in Belarus. The pro-democracy activists presented a clear message that unity of forces in the opposition camp, strong voter support, and continued U.S. and EU assistance are the necessary ingredients for Lukashenko's removal from power. The political and ideological diversity represented in the Belarusian delegation only served to reinforce that message.

112. (U) Congressman Kolbe did not have an opportunity to clear on this cable.

KELLY